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In the balance? Civil society and the peace process 2002-2008

Oliver Walton with Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

1 Introduction

As Sri Lanka slid back towards open hostilities in 2006, existing patterns of civil society engagement in peace negotiations came under widespread criticism on the grounds that they had failed to broaden participation and that they had largely excluded civil society organisations (CSOs) that were critical of peace efforts. As peace talks broke down, the need to move beyond a 'charmed circle' of Colombo-based peace NGOs and to engage with a 'broader civil society' became a perennial refrain from funding agencies. This period was also marked by an increasingly visible confrontation between pro-peace civil society and patriotic nationalist groups mobilising against peace negotiations and international engagement expressed through growing attacks on NGOs in the media and at a number of public events.¹

This chapter explores this complex predicament facing civil society as Sri Lanka returned to war. First, it presents a brief summary of donors' engagements with civil society during the ceasefire period and describes how the nature and scope of civil society peace work was shaped by the shifting political context. Second, it contrasts donor-backed peace efforts with the more robust campaigns of nationalist civil society groups after 2005. Third, it examines how the changing political climate impacted upon civil society peacebuilding efforts focusing in particular on the way in which pro-peace civil society actors managed the increasingly critical impressions of their work stemming from the domestic political arena.

Drawing these strands together, the chapter concludes by reflecting on the collective timidity of civil society actors during the ceasefire period and argues that this was an outcome of two interconnecting sets of factors. On the one hand, civil society's capacity to contribute to political transformation was constrained by its historical relations with the state. These patterns of interaction drove the dynamic relationship between two conflicting civil society arenas – patriotic groups fed off weaknesses in pro-peace civil society while the position of peace groups was further undermined by the success of these nationalist organizations. On the other hand, the approaches to peacebuilding pursued by donors during the ceasefire period encouraged a growing depoliticization and technicalization of civil society peace work which privileged a consensual rather than a politically engaged role for civil society actors. This analysis sees civil society organisations as confronted with a fundamental tension between a cosmopolitan view of politics that saw political change as the outcome of processes of governance reform prompted by extra-governmental actors and a local perception of politics that viewed political progress as a product of changes in government and debates conducted in an arena inhabited exclusively by political parties. Civil society's efforts to build peace during the ceasefire period involved a perpetual balancing act between asserting liberal models of bottom-up change and reconciling these with an increasingly predominant and countervailing domestic vision of politics.

Before going any further, it is important to clarify our use of the term 'civil society'. International actors supporting peace in Sri Lanka tended to utilise a normative view of civil society as a realm capable of building trust and co-operation, promoting and protecting rights and democracy and restraining an unruly state. This focus on the democratizing potential of civil society has obscured a more influential set of organizations capable of mobilizing without reference to liberal democratic goals. The liberal approach to civil society also presented a hard boundary between civil society and the state, which failed to capture the fluid relationship between the state and civil society arenas that existed in the Sri Lankan context. In Sri Lanka, the state often appropriated and co-opted the initiatives of liberal-minded civil society by mimicking their discourses, methods and techniques or by establishing formal mechanisms for collaboration (Saravanamuttu 1999). For the purposes of this paper we shall utilise a broad definition that defines civil society as 'an arena of uncoerced

collective action around shared interests, purposes and values'.² This definition incorporates a range of organisations such as NGOs, trades unions, religious groups and the media.³

2 Building the civil peace: Civil society and liberal peacebuilding

The signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002 prompted a rapid expansion of donor peacebuilding efforts. These strategies cohered around a 'liberal peacebuilding' model characterised by a simultaneous pursuit of economic and political reform alongside measures to resolve the conflict (Goodhand & Korf, this volume). For many donors, particularly smaller European ones, these strategies envisaged a supportive role for CSOs where they could build on their existing competencies in the humanitarian, development and policy fields to perform a variety of roles which included supporting mechanisms to broaden societal engagement in the peace process, addressing conflict at the societal level, promoting bottom-up reform of governance and building popular support for the peace process (see Burke & Mulakala, this volume).

2.1 Liberal peace building in Sri Lanka

This growing interest in civil society peacebuilding stemmed from changes in understandings of peace and conflict during the 1990s and a shift towards a broad conflict transformation model that recognised the interplay of social, economic and political factors in conflict (Richmond 2005). For Richmond (2005a: 32) the incorporation of civil society in these interventions performed two primary functions. First, the access and flexibility of these actors permitted more intimate forms of intervention such as institutionalizing bottom-up forms of governance which states on their own were unable to deliver. Second, involving civil society helped to construct a 'peacebuilding consensus' capable of legitimizing what was otherwise a primarily state-led project (*ibid*).

The liberal peacebuilding model prompted changes in civil society's institutional relations and saw the formation of 'strategic complexes' of state and non-state, as well as international and domestic actors, where the aims and interests of CSOs (and their beneficiaries) were increasingly assumed to be aligned with the agendas of both donors and conflict actors (Duffield 2001, 2007). Rather than seeing civil society as a check on state power, funding agencies increasingly conceived of CSOs as an ancillary form of governmental authority. Liberal peacebuilding involved a merger of several strands of peace discourse where the emancipatory peacebuilding agendas of CSOs were increasingly blurred with the orthodox and conservative models favoured by states and IGOs (Richmond 2005, Heathershaw 2008). While this capacity to blur the boundaries between governmental and non-governmental action played an important coalition-building function, as will be seen below, this integration of peace discourse also proved politically destabilising for local CSOs whose legitimacy was undermined by their association with more interventionist and conservative models of peacebuilding.

As argued elsewhere in this volume, these modes of engagement were not simply foisted upon unsuspecting civil society groups by external actors. Attempts to generate a civil peace built on CSOs' growing engagement in peace and conflict issues during the 1970s and 80s when a number of NGOs emerged with the aim of addressing the ethnic and political roots of conflict in Sri Lanka. As Bastian (1999) has documented, these home grown responses to conflict were increasingly overshadowed during the 1990s by a more generic, donor-driven approach to peacebuilding. Rather than attempting to foster long-term, locally-generated institutional reform, interventions increasingly relied on tool-kit approaches targeted at the community-level.

The perceived role for civil society was extended after the ceasefire of 2002 when donors began to pursue a more ambitious programme of multi-track peacebuilding. Many funding agencies launched programmes where civil society preformed a primarily supportive or collaborative role alongside donors, the private sector

and domestic political actors; for example, by providing assistance in broader governance reform efforts or supporting track one peace negotiations.⁴

As will be explored below, this consensual framework increasingly saw civil society as a source of technical inputs to the peace process rather than a vessel for channelling political grievance. Where donors did attempt to harness civil society's capacity to mobilize popular support, they tended to choose to work with organizations that were openly supportive of the peace process, rather than those that were publicly critical of either of the conflict actors (Liyanage 2006, Keenan 2007). Attempts to foster popular mobilization were often couched as attempts to neutralize the threat of civil society groups or political parties mobilising against the peace process.

Civil society's increasingly ambivalent political contribution to peacebuilding was also an outcome of the bipolar 'step-by-step' model embodied in the peace process which privileged progress at the track-one level over the resolution of core political and human rights issues. CSOs were discouraged from raising social justice issues by a discourse that branded actors that voiced overt criticism of the process as 'spoilers' (Saravanamuttu 2003, Goodhand & Klem 2005). This model limited the space for alternative visions of peace and undermined civil society's role as a vehicle for representing the concerns of marginalised groups.

The depoliticisation of civil society also owed much to the organization of political dissent in Sri Lanka, which, since the late 1970s, had made it increasingly difficult for CSOs to adopt a confrontational stance towards the state. This caution was also connected to the experience of the 1994-5 peace process when CSOs were given a central role in Chandrika Kumaratunga's *sudu nellum* (white lotus) movement (a campaign to build public support for the PA's devolution strategy) and civil society representatives were given a key role in a new National Integration Policy Unit. After the failure of the process and the launch of Kumaratunga's 'war for peace' strategy, many CSOs felt betrayed, encouraging a more circumspect attitude towards the latest peace process (Orjuela 2004: 226).

2.2 Donors and civil society peace initiatives

Donor support for civil society peacebuilding after 2002 took a variety of forms that largely concurred with the depoliticized tropes of the liberal peace building model. Although projects often entail multiple goals that defy simple categorisation, Table 1 attempts a tentative typology of different categories of donor-supported peace building activities. This typology indicates that most of these activities were based on expectations about CSOs' technical skills such as the capacity to facilitate interaction between different groups or disseminate technical knowledge about conflict resolution and governance issues. We have grouped these activities around four main objectives: (1) complementing Track 1 activities, (2) creating a peaceful and prosperous society, (3) building a democratic polity and (4) fostering popular support for peace.

The bipolar model of conflict resolution embodied in the peace process led many funders to explore mechanisms to broaden political engagement to *complement Track One negotiations* (1). CSOs such as the Berghof Foundation and INPACT provided informal spaces for politicians to initiate discussion on the conflict. CSOs were also involved in a number of mechanisms designed to feed the views and concerns of marginalized groups into the peace process and forge broader political consensus. Examples of this kind of work include the One Text Initiative⁵ and support to bodies such as the Peace Secretariat for Muslims.

Several donors felt that conflict could be managed by strategically implementing a range of projects with civil society actors in conflict-affected regions which aimed to *create a more peaceful and prosperous society* (2). The Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI), for example, focused on building networks of CSOs, which they

hoped would increase communities' capacity to mitigate conflicts (USAID 2007), for example the Foundation for Co-existence's (FCE) human security programme in the East that monitored incidents of violent conflict at the local level. Many governmental and non-governmental donors committed a considerable amount of funding to peace education. These programmes were normally implemented using training workshops which were designed to sensitize individuals to the key political issues of the peace process (such as federalism or devolution) or to impart conflict resolution or facilitative skills. CSOs were also involved in work designed to forge links across territorial and societal boundaries, for example by conducting exchange programmes or peace camps where representatives from one ethnic community were invited to spend time with people from another in an effort to build trust and co-operation. Finally, considerable donor support was committed to humanitarian and development work in conflict-affected regions, which attempted to build peace either by building trust and co-operation between communities or by delivering a 'peace dividend' through improving living conditions.

The ceasefire period provided greater room for CSOs to implement longer-term measures to address governance issues as a means of addressing the long-term aim of *building a more democratic polity* (3). Civil society shared expertise with government institutions in participatory techniques and conflict resolution skills. This involved attempts to build the capacity of local government institutions, to facilitate links between local government officials and community-based organizations or to help to establish new institutions designed to broaden engagement in the peace process. Peacebuilding NGOs also worked to facilitate dialogue and generate policy designed to address structural causes of conflict. This work sometimes fed into advocacy campaigns designed to lobby power-holders and promote these policies or values to the wider public.

The final role played by CSOs during the ceasefire period was building and fostering *popular support for peace* (4). Rather than being based on civil society's perceived technical skills, this work was based on an expectation that civil society was capable of representing and mobilizing marginalized groups. While some CSOs gave their explicit support to the peace process, the commitment of others was attached to more nebulous goals such as non-violence or reconciliation. Many of these civil society initiatives were sponsored by donors. These included peace marches or mass meditations initiated by NGOs such as Sarvodaya and donor-funded coalitions of CSOs such as the People's Peace Front or the National Anti-War Front.

Donor-backed campaigns, however, were often criticized on the grounds that they provided free transport or lunches to participants and lost credibility as a result (Orjuela 2004: 154-5). Pro-peace groups also often failed to unite in broad-based campaigns because of personal rivalries, divisions between urban and rural-based civil society or between civil society groups from different ethnic groups (*ibid*: 164-5). There are a few important examples of popular mobilization for peace which did not involve much donor support. These mobilizations often stemmed from membership groups representing interest groups opposed to the war and included organizations such as the Association of Disabled Ex-Service Personnel, the Association for War-Affected Women and the Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action (see Orjuela 2004).

Table One: Overview of civil society peace activities

Objective	Assumptions/ Civil society capacities	Sub-objectives	Main activities
<i>Complementing Track One negotiations</i>	Conflict primarily resolved through elite negotiations but success of this process bolstered by broader engagement/ Civil society possesses useful technical skills, can provide an arena for facilitation, help build consensus for negotiations	Bringing marginalised groups into the peace process	Assisted in the establishment of Track 1.5-2 initiatives: e.g. Peace Secretariat for Muslims, One-Text Initiative
		Track Two work	Facilitating dialogue between politicians at national and regional level.
<i>Creating a peaceful and prosperous society</i>	Conflict is a product of societal divisions and underdevelopment/ Civil society capable of managing and resolving local- level conflicts, reconciling conflicting societal groups, implementing developmental work in order to build a 'peace dividend'	Managing conflicts	Mapping conflicts, early warning systems, monitoring work
		Peace education	Workshops, training programmes, dialogues, media training
		Facilitating links between ethnic groups	Exchange programmes, peace camps esp. with youth
		Relief and reconstruction	Development projects in conflict-affected regions, development projects with 'peacebuilding components'
<i>Building a democratic polity</i>	Conflict an outcome of 'bad governance' / Civil society can transfer skills in participation, conflict resolution, human rights to state institutions, other civil society groups and communities to improve governance 'good governance'	Governance reform	Capacity building and training of state institutions, building links between communities and state
		Policy work and advocacy	Research, lobbying, advocacy campaigns
		Human rights work	Building public awareness of human rights, training, case work, documenting abuses, disseminating research
<i>Fostering popular support for peace</i>	Popular support for peace can transform conflict by encouraging politicians to adopt pro-peace positions, ensure elites' commitment to peace/ Civil society capable of mobilising large constituencies	Campaigns	Issue-based lobbying/ awareness raising, media work, collating and presenting information about peace and conflict to the public, conducting surveys
		Demonstrations	Peace meditations, rallies

3 Alternative civil society approaches to peace and conflict

As well as organizations that were broadly supportive of democratic values and a negotiated settlement to the conflict, a range of civil society groups were either openly opposed to a negotiated settlement or were supportive of the goals of one of the key parties to the conflict. These groups were largely organized along ethnic lines and maintained close links with political actors. The first subset consisted of patriotic organizations linked to nationalist political parties, which mobilized in opposition to the peace process and in support of war. Many of these groups were affiliated with the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), who used proxy CSOs to reach out to particular sub-groups of its constituency. These included the Socialist Students Union and the Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF) which played an important role in recruiting youth cadres. The JVP also used unions such as the Inter-Company Employees Union and All-Ceylon Trade Union Federation (ACTU) for organizing strikes against the government.

Other important groups included the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), an umbrella organization founded in 1998 that brought together a number of patriotic Buddhist and professional groups in opposition to the peace process and the LTTE (Rampton & Welikala 2005: 58-9). The Patriotic Nationalist Movement (PNM), formed in 2003, provided an important platform to draw together various strands of opposition to the peace process and the heavy international engagement in Sri Lanka. The organization included JVP, JHU and leading SLFP politicians and played an important role in mobilizing the populist base in the UPFA's victory in the parliamentary elections of 2004 (Rampton & Welikala, this volume).

The second subset was civil society groups that were aligned with the Tamil nationalist cause. The most important among these was the Tamil Relief Organisation (TRO), which played a central role in coordinating humanitarian and development activities in LTTE-controlled areas in the North. The role played by TRO changed after the organization was banned in Sri Lanka in 2007. During this period, its monitoring of the ground situation in the East and the LTTE-controlled North became increasingly linked to human rights lobbying work. TRO played a central role at the human rights council in Geneva, campaigning against human rights violations committed by the government. Some Tamil diaspora groups have played an important role in raising funds for the LTTE (Gunaratna 2006, HRW 2006). These have included several 'front' organizations officially functioning as charities. As a result of the West's growing intolerance of activities supporting terrorism after September 11th 2001, many of these organizations have been banned and had their assets frozen.

4 The changing political context for pro-peace civil society action

The kind of peacebuilding work performed by CSOs changed over the course of the ceasefire period. In the first year or so following the signing of the CFA there was a rapid growth in peace activities funded by donors. The opening up of the A9 road connecting the South with LTTE-controlled territories in the North provided greater opportunities for development NGOs to scale-up reconstruction activities in these conflict-affected areas. Greater freedom of movement allowed many CSOs to begin reconciliation programmes that linked groups from different ethnic communities. While there was an active peace process, civil society was able to lobby on human rights and humanitarian issues, helping to get these concerns recognised in the peace process. Civil society activism also contributed to the growing attention granted to these issues by donors in the 2003 Tokyo Conference.

Tsunami

The tsunami of December 2004 altered the nature of civil society's engagement in peace in three principal ways. First, many donors and CSOs became understandably pre-occupied with meeting the overwhelming needs of tsunami-affected populations. The focus on the tsunami distracted many peace organizations from their core work and encouraged some NGOs to broaden their operational mandates into reconstruction and relief work (see Frerks & Klem, this volume). Second, the rapid influx of funding and the arrival of numerous INGOs and foreign funding agencies that accompanied the tsunami created an unruly aid environment encouraging short-termism and lower standards of implementation and transparency, which resulted in a growing number of incidents of NGO malpractice or corruption (Telford & Cosgrave 2006). Third, these incidents increased public concerns about the motives and practices of NGOs. These fears were picked up by nationalist political parties who used the growing presence of NGOs as an opportunity to scrutinize and question NGOs' role in Sri Lankan society. The expanded scale of NGO funding also became a concern for government agencies, prompting a re-evaluation of the government's regulation of the NGO sector. These concerns coincided with a growing political space for nationalist political parties after the alliance between President Chandrika Kumaratunga's SLFP and the JVP in April 2004 and drove a more hostile government stance towards civil society that was intensified after the election of Mahinda Rajapakse in November 2005.

Election of Mahinda Rajapakse and the return to war

Rather than staking his government's legitimacy on his capacity to secure progress in the peace process and international backing, Mahinda Rajapakse jettisoned the incipient consensus on conflict resolution between Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickramasinghe by pushing through the de-merger of the North and Eastern Provinces, defending the constitutional status quo of the unitary state and fighting a war against terror as opposed to an ethnic conflict. Rajapakse's election victory was also reliant on concessions to nationalist parties who were committed to reducing the influence of international actors and liberal NGOs in Sri Lanka (Rampton & Welikala, this volume; Uyangoda, this volume).

One important mechanism for the increased pressure on civil society was the Parliamentary Select Committee for the investigation of NGOs, established in January 2006. The committee had a 'special focus' on the tsunami, but was also a response to concerns that NGOs were engaged in activities that were 'inimical to the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka' and 'detrimental to the national and social well being of the country'. The committee, which was spearheaded by the JVP, summoned a number of prominent NGOs and the public hearings helped to fuel an increasingly vociferous critique of NGOs in the media. While these anti-NGO strains had been a consistent feature of the Sri Lankan media for many years, this period saw an intensification of criticism and a mainstreaming of these critiques into the state media.

The return to open hostilities in 2006 provided further impetus to the growing hostility towards civil society. The government became increasingly concerned about NGOs operating in conflict-affected areas both because of their potential to highlight government human rights abuses and because of the risk that NGO resources might be misappropriated by the LTTE. The escalating 'shadow war' in the East resulted in an increasingly dangerous environment for humanitarian actors. Between January 2006 to August 2007, 40 humanitarian workers and religious leaders were killed and 20 'disappeared', including 17 local staff of the French NGO *Action Contra la Faim* who were assassinated in Mutur in August 2006 (HRW 2008, 334).

Changing boundaries of political action

These shifting political conditions saw a rapid switching of acceptable political behaviour for civil society actors. Criticism of CSOs engaged in peace work became more visible and the space for dissent narrowed. Civil society actions became increasingly viewed through a patriotic lens. CSOs were increasingly labelled 'traitors', 'LTTE-sympathisers' or 'terrorists' for voicing pro-peace positions or presenting critical perspectives on the state's actions. The revised Emergency Regulations imposed in 2006 introduced a range of new, vaguely worded terrorism offences which reduced the media's capacity to voice dissent on the war, and the scope for

humanitarian interventions in the North and East. Civil society groups such as PNM and NMAT became increasingly vocal and strident in their criticisms of NGOs. At a PNM rally in 2005, for example, Wimal Weerawansa, the then JVP propaganda secretary declared: 'We should spit on NGOs and stop them from walking on our streets'.⁶

This opposition towards foreign-funded civil society was not new and grew out of a broader nationalist concern with the perceived interference in Sri Lankan affairs by external actors which can be traced to Independence (Wickramasinghe 2001). In the hostile environment emerging after 2004, however, the language of peace became increasingly contested and many of the latent caricatures of NGOs that grew out of this nationalist perspective were reactivated. Promoting peace in a situation of war became equated with showing sympathy for the status-quo position embodied in the peace process, where the LTTE were recognised as a legitimate state-like actor. By late 2006, this view represented the official position of the government. In a reiteration of George W. Bush's famous remark that had launched the global war on terror five years previously, President Rajapakse announced in December 2006: 'you are either with us or against us'.⁷ Details of civil society peacebuilding activities that were publicised in this environment were closely scrutinized for their potential to subvert the military aims of the government. Criticisms of NGOs often focused on instances where NGOs had overstepped the perceived boundaries of legitimate political action. NGO activities in LTTE-controlled areas frequently became the focus of misappropriation scandals where NGO were accused of providing resources to the LTTE. Similarly, situations where NGOs were deemed to have transgressed into the governmental arena (for example by engaging in projects such as conflict resolution or human rights training for the military) were used by their critics to highlight the sinister motivations of nongovernmental action in Sri Lanka. As the next section describes, this environment caused particular problems for organisations that had identified most closely with donor-backed peacebuilding strategies.

4. Strategies of accommodation and differentiation: 'Peacebuilding without using the word peace'

The backlash against civil society was most problematic for those peacebuilding specialists that actively promoted a federal political solution to the conflict. One interviewee stated the concept of federalism had become a 'dirty word'⁸, while another observed that these terms had become increasingly 'allergic to the people'.⁹ Sensitivity to the language of peacebuilding was not simply caused by concerns about NGOs' political support for a negotiated settlement, however. These words had also become signifiers of the values and identity of the organisations that used them. Donor-supported peace work required a particular expertise and familiarity with highly technical English discourses, which meant that the sector tended to be dominated by large national NGOs and a small elite network of Colombo activists (Orjuela 2004). Peacebuilding language therefore became increasingly associated with an elitist, English speaking milieu, whose actions and objectives were 'not well understood by ordinary people'.¹⁰ The concentration of funding into the hands of a small number of Colombo based organisations drove the nationalist caricature that peace NGOs were rent-seeking 'peace vendors'. Some smaller organisations avoided peace terminology for this reason:

Interviewer: Why do you not use the word peace [in the field]?

NGO manager: Because it is a marketised thing....sometimes people have a bad impression of this now...because of the propaganda of the JVP and the JHU.¹¹

Opposition to NGOs was closely tied to the use of 'peace' buzzwords and labels. These labels became a quick and easy way for critics to call into question the motives of the NGOs using them, either by claiming that they were elitist, money-making enterprises or that they were LTTE sympathisers. Because these labels played an important signifying function, some NGOs could reduce risks by avoiding or dispensing with them. A number of NGOs explicitly shifted language to avoid confrontation with nationalists:

Anti-NGO feeling has become more mainstream....this year [2006] we had to change our strategy to reach the people. Sometimes we didn't use the word peace. We are trying to work in another way to develop peace without using the word peace.¹²

Another national peacebuilding organisation re-labelled a community peacebuilding project in the South of Sri Lanka:

We don't mention peace: it's a problem solving forum. It's a non-violent problem-solving forum.¹³

One peacebuilding specialist, for example, adapted a peace programme in Anuradhapura by shifting from an approach that aimed to promote the peace process and a federal solution to an approach that focussed on discussions with the local community about their issues with the lack of responsiveness from central government:

They realise that the uneven development in the country is not helping them... So this makes them realise the federal situation is the best way.¹⁴

While this approach was designed to minimise opposition on the ground from critical political activists, it also demonstrated a more effective and locally relevant version of peace work than this organisation's previous approach which had focused on the promotion of the concept of federalism. Some donors were advocating this approach as the climate for civil society work deteriorated:

It's better to have debates about the rule of law, better courts, combating corruption etcetera...that's a much easier debate to have...We should de-link it from the peace process...those discussions can be seen as perfectly legitimate because they are not seen as a threat and they are not seen as biased to one side or the other or apportioning blame.¹⁵

As well as distancing themselves from the increasingly toxic language of liberal peacebuilding, NGOs became increasingly concerned to repackage their broader organisational identities. The term 'NGO' had typically prompted an ambivalent reaction from Sri Lankan CSOs. On the one hand, it served as a means of signifying a set of capacities and competencies to foreign funding organisations. On the other hand, it signalled a set of potentially negative connotations to the broader public which included being professionalised, elite and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people (cf. Hilhorst 2003, 5). One of the key outcomes of the changing political environment after late 2005 was a rapid change in the relative weight these two competing versions of the term 'NGO' wielded in the public arena. In this context, the negative associations of the term NGO began to outweigh its positive connotations. This encouraged many NGOs to start to stress their 'un-NGOness'. In the course of several interviews with local and national NGOs, many were keen to distance themselves with the increasingly negative connotations associated with the term 'NGO' by denying their NGO status ('we are not an NGO...we are a people's movement')¹⁶ or dissociating themselves from 'NGO people': ('we've always tried not to be involved with the NGO people').¹⁷

While some civil society groups attempted to distance themselves from the NGO sector as a whole, others preferred to highlight particular subsets of 'fake' or 'mutant' organisations that were using the NGO label, but were using it unjustly to mask ulterior motivations or to cover up their inexperience (cf. Bryant 2002). Stressing these 'mutant' or 'fake NGOs' served both to reassert the positive qualities of an 'authentic' core of the NGO sector and to highlight an NGO's own good qualities. Smaller district-based NGOs, for example, utilised the popular arguments about NGOs employed by nationalists and stressed how larger NGOs were often out of touch with the concerns of local populations or were engaged in a particularly mercenary kind of

peace work. Some more established NGOs criticised new or inexperienced organisations that had mushroomed in the aftermath of the tsunami, again reiterating popular concerns that these organisations were behaving in a way that was culturally irresponsible or that these organisations were simply profiting from the disaster. Several peacebuilding NGOs tended to contrast their own expertise with the relatively ill-considered peace work of less specialist organisations. As well as performing both defensive and promotional functions, these tactics of differentiation were also creative attempts to help their organisation make sense in an overall context where the aims and motivations of NGOs were widely questioned. By stressing the problems caused by ‘fakes’, NGOs were able to cautiously begin to reassert the credibility of the authentic majority.

Implications for liberal peacebuilders

This brief elaboration on the experience of pro-peace civil society actors in the volatile period after 2005 highlights a number of important issues with the liberal peacebuilding strategies pursued by donors. First, the discourse and mechanisms of engagement favoured by liberal peacebuilders tended to blur the agendas of local CSOs with what quickly became cast as an elite, externally imposed programme of state and societal reform. The tendency for donor funding to be channelled through cosmopolitan, Colombo-based organisations drove an increasingly potent caricature of pro-peace civil society as elitist, rent-seeking and out of touch with ground realities.

Second, by subsuming a range of distinctive policy agendas under a broad peacebuilding objective, the liberal peacebuilding model also made it more difficult for NGOs to find useful channels for engagement after 2005. CSOs that used peace buzzwords were increasingly seen by their critics as pursuing a particular political position with regards to the conflict that appeared to contradict and challenge the government’s political strategy and apportion blame to those actors that did not lend their support to the peace process. By couching their concerns in the language of peace during this period, CSOs’ efforts often proved counter-productive; they hardened divisions between those seeking a negotiated solution and those who were opposed to one.¹⁸

Third, this section has highlighted CSOs’ (and to a lesser extent donors’) growing awareness of these problems after 2005. Rather than simply blindly following existing presentational and operational strategies, NGOs engaged in intensive efforts to repackage their organisations and their work to make it more palatable and relevant in light of the changing political climate. This highlights a broader lesson, stressed elsewhere in this volume, that domestic actors’ engagement with liberal peacebuilding was negotiable at a number of levels.

5. Conclusions

This section provides some broader reflections on the experience of civil society peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, elaborating on three important implications from the above analysis. First, it argues that donors’ engagement with civil society was hampered by a failure to consider the historical role played by civil society in the Sri Lankan context. This stance lacked a thorough assessment of the way in which civil society interacted with the domestic politics and the limits this placed on civil society’s potential to contribute to a process of widespread political transformation. Second, it describes the processes by which pro-peace civil society activities became increasingly depoliticised during the peace process and explains how these trends contributed to the growing backlash against NGOs after 2005. Third, it builds on the discussion of civil society’s responses to the changing political environment to draw some tentative lessons for future engagement.

State-society relations in Sri Lanka and liberal peacebuilding

A key problem with donor perspectives on civil society has been the lack of a rigorous analysis of the way in which civil society interacts with the realm of party politics. In Sri Lanka, the capacity for civil society to play a

role either in challenging the state or in articulating popular concerns to the centre was hampered by a number of factors. First, Sri Lankan politics was highly centralized and structured around patron-client relations. These characteristics limited the space for public dissent and curbed the emergence of national groups capable of articulating the demands of social interest groups to the centre (Moore 1985). At the same time, these features meant that the most effective CSOs were those that were directly supported by the government or political parties. Second, ethno-nationalism was the dominant basis for political mobilization in Sri Lanka. The recourse to ethno-nationalism in political discourse after Independence strengthened civil society groups that mobilized along ethnic lines whilst weakening groups that aimed to bridge or overcome ethnic divisions.¹⁹

Third, conflict in Sri Lanka accentuated the marginalization of civil society by closing the space for critical or alternative political positions to be voiced. At the time of the JVP uprisings in the early 70s and late 1980s, critics of the government in the South were often branded JVP sympathizers while many groups critical of the war with the LTTE in the 80s and 90s were accused of being closet LTTE-supporters. In the Tamil polity, the LTTE was intolerant of alternative voices and the independence of Tamil CSOs was slowly eroded during the 1980s. The state's relationship with civil society became increasingly hostile in the aftermath of the JVP uprisings of the late 1980s. During this period, NGOs that questioned the erosion of democratic governance and neglect of human rights were threatened by the state, with some organizations singled out for persecution (Saravanamuttu 1999). CSOs such as the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) which had mobilized on a joint platform with leftist political parties in the 1970s were increasingly marginalized in the 1980s and 90s.

All of these factors limit the potential for bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. The historical development of civil society in Sri Lanka made it more suited to playing a supportive and contingent role where influence was heavily dependent upon the acquiescence or patronage of the state. In contrast to the expectations of some donors and activists, these underlying political structures made it difficult for civil society to forge a broad-based popular consensus capable of unsettling the agendas of conflict actors and pushing them into a negotiated settlement. As the experience of CSOs during the ceasefire period demonstrates, the dominance of violent ethno-nationalistic political mobilization in Sri Lanka attached considerable risks to pursuing peace with foreign backing. The relative success of patriotic civil society groups during the ceasefire period was also a reflection of these structural characteristics; these groups were effective because they have been part of an essentially political form of mobilization and have received direct support from political parties.

The view of civil society associated with liberal peacebuilding approach then, was reliant upon a suspension of disbelief about the character of Sri Lanka's political system. Just as the notion that pro-peace CSOs were capable of building political support for the government's peace strategy independently of patronage of the state or political parties was flawed, so was the belief that this popular support would be capable of taming illiberal elements of civil society mobilized through political channels.

Depoliticization of pro-peace civil society

Many donor-funded projects conformed to the more consensual and ambivalent model of political engagement described in section 2.²⁰ Donor initiatives such as the *People's Forum* project saw CSOs working to facilitate improved relationships between local government actors and community groups. Similarly, monitoring work, rather than feeding into human rights campaigns or generating critical accounts of conflict actors, was increasingly linked to more technical strategies to strengthen governance by improving links between the centre and periphery. These patterns of engagement were driven by the well-documented

processes of marketization and professionalization within the aid sector and by donors' lack of capacity. As one donor argued 'a lot of donors [were] quite clueless' and as a result had to 'rely on NGOs for information'.²¹ In the context of these relations, CSOs were increasingly seen as purveyors of local knowledge and information rather than political agents capable of transforming conflict.

As mentioned in the last section, donors' engagements with civil society often neglected the more politicised versions of civil society that mobilised without reference to liberal democratic norms. While donors were aware of these groups, they often struggled to know how to engage with them effectively. Most donors lacked the long-term perspective necessary for broadening engagement beyond like-minded groups. As one interviewee observed, donors often found themselves 'lulled into a world of administrative convenience' where Colombo-based NGOs, who understood how to structure their work around performance indicators, were selected as partners over un-likeminded groups with whom it was difficult to demonstrate results.²² Where donors did engage with these groups, they often used large national NGOs as gatekeepers and saw their primary objective as building the capacity either by formalising their organisational structures or providing education on peace and conflict issues. Coordinated efforts from donors such as FLICT (Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation) helped to channel funds beyond Colombo but failed to build sustainable organisations capable of voicing the concerns of the districts.

The patterns of engagement between civil society and donors that characterized the ceasefire period exacerbated the growing nationalist critique of NGOs and international engagement. This happened in a number of ways. First, donors' narrow support for a small group of Colombo-based NGOs weakened the popular legitimacy of civil society. The increased dominance of a small group of NGOs that received the majority of donor funding increased resentment of these groups from local activists and contributed to a growing bifurcation of pro-peace civil society by undermining solidarity between national and local NGOs and between activists and service providers.

Second, the growth in funding to pro-peace CSOs fuelled concerns about the illegitimate influence international actors were exerting on Sri Lankan political affairs. Third, the liberal peacebuilding model pursued by donors during the ceasefire period increasingly saw NGOs playing a bridging role where they were expected to overcome institutional boundaries (between the state and civil society, external and internal actors) as well as territorial ones (by linking communities across the borders between government and LTTE-controlled areas). As the ceasefire broke down, however, the fragility of these transgressions was exposed and instances where NGOs had transgressed institutional boundaries (e.g. by working on security sector reform) or territorial boundaries (e.g. by working in LTTE-controlled areas) became key sites of political symbolism and central to nationalists' anti-NGO rhetoric.²³

A balancing act? The dilemmas of civil society peacebuilding

The existing literature on civil society peacebuilding during the ceasefire period has been consistent in its criticism of the strategies of engagement pursued by donors. Various authors have argued that donors' engagement with civil society was narrowly focused, overly bureaucratic and that this approach had encouraged a depoliticized approach to peace work (Orjuela 2004, Goodhand & Klem 2005, Liyanage 2006, Keenan 2007). The literature has been more divided about how civil society peacebuilding could be made more effective. Authors such as Goodhand & Klem (2005) have highlighted a number of small ways in which donor engagement with civil society could be improved – for example by encouraging donors to make greater efforts to engage with the un-likeminded. Keenan (2007) adopted a more radical stance, advocating a more politically engaged approach to conflict from civil society premised upon a radical overhaul of the organisational and institutional architecture of pro-peace civil society. He argues that a shift in the political orientation of CSOs can only be achieved by addressing the democratic deficits of Colombo-based peace NGOs,

by developing stronger relations with marginalized groups and abandoning the bureaucratic modes of engagement with donors.

These potential solutions mask a number of structural constraints and tensions inherent in civil society peace work. First, as has been argued above, calls for a more politically engaged civil society run the risk of neglecting the historical relationship between the state and civil society and in particular the past experience of pro-peace civil society which had become accustomed to patronage or sponsorship from the state, for example during the *sudu nellum* campaign of the mid-1990s. The common perception in Sri Lankan politics is that political change can only be achieved via the realm of party politics. As a result, the capacity for civil society to play such a role in the Sri Lankan context is reliant upon the prior transformation and opening up of the political system.

Second, these suggestions gloss over some inherent tensions in CSOs' work. On the one hand, as described above, links with international agencies have eroded the legitimacy of domestic CSOs. On the other hand, these international linkages have been critical both in providing support to these organisations as well as ensuring their political influence. As such, dispensing with these links would prove highly problematic. Drawing on international networks by lobbying international institutions on human rights issues has proved one of the most effective mechanisms with which Sri Lankan civil society can influence state behaviour. As well as providing leverage to restrain and influence government behaviour, connections with international actors have also provided valuable financial resources and helped to bolster the security of CSOs. These tensions between the international and national realms also make it difficult for donors to engage with the unlikeminded. Groups that are opposed to international engagement are likely to balk at attempts by international actors to engage. These problems will be difficult for CSOs to overcome by themselves and are likely to be breached only via a broader process of political transformation.

Rather than advocating either a more abrasive and confrontational approach to peace or a more tentative consensus-building model for civil society engagement in conflict, this chapter supports the view that there are potential gains from both approaches. CSOs' contributions are likely to be closely constrained both by their organisational and political roots and by fluctuations in the political context in which they operate. Finally, the chapter has demonstrated how maintaining a flexible and adaptive approach towards peacebuilding may provide CSOs with the most effective means of exerting political influence in a volatile and antagonistic political environment.

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¹ Clashes between these two spheres was not new and can be traced back as far as 1950s, although the conflictual dynamic became more prominent after the rapid growth of the NGO sector in the later 1970s (Wanigaratne 1997). Vociferous public opposition to peace groups had occurred in mid 1990s and during the early stages of the peace process.

² 'What is Civil Society', LSE Centre for Civil Society, Available from http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm (accessed 12th November 2008).

³ There has not been space here to fully address the role of media organisations during the ceasefire period.

⁴ Overall aid grew with the advent of the peace process from around \$572 million in 2002 to \$991 million in 2003, an elevated level that has more or less been maintained to the present day. Funding for NGOs can be estimated at around \$200 and \$300 million in 2007 (based on information from the NGO secretariat). In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, this figure was higher – in 2005 approximately \$400 million was channelled through NGOs (CBSL 2006). The majority of funding for peace-related activities came from a small group of western donors (such as Norway, Sweden, Germany, Canada, the US and the UK). Since the 1990s the Sri Lankan NGO sector became increasingly dominated by a small number of large national organisations, which received the majority of funding (see Walton 2008). This trend was accelerated by the growth in peacebuilding work after the ceasefire.

⁵ The One Text Initiative was a forum designed to support peace negotiations by stimulating open discussion between Sri Lanka's main political parties.

⁶ 'JVP slams NGOs, western countries for meddling', TamilNet, 6th April 2005, Available from <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=14625> (accessed 12th November 2008).

⁷ Addressing "all political parties, all media, and all people's organisations," he declared: "You decide whether you should be with a handful of terrorists or with the common man who is in the majority. You must choose between these two sides. No one can represent these two sides at any one time." ('Sri Lankan president reimposes anti-terror laws in preparation for intensified war', Available from <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/dec2006/sril-d09.shtml>, accessed 12th November 2007).

⁸ Interview with the director of a large national NGO, Colombo 6th October 2006.

⁹ Interview with representative of large national NGO, Colombo 14th February 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with small national peacebuilding specialist, 23rd September 2006. This discursive approach was contrasted by several national peacebuilding NGOs in interviews with the 'easy language' of the JVP and the JHU.

¹¹ Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

¹² Interview with small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

¹³ Interview with representative from smaller national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 21st March 2007.

¹⁴ Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

¹⁵ Interview with donor, Colombo, 6th December 2006.

¹⁶ Interviews with representatives from national NGOs, Colombo/ Kandy 20th/ 29th September 2006.

¹⁷ Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

¹⁸ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 6th December 2006.

¹⁹ Historically, the largest and most influential civil society groups in Sri Lanka had been those mobilizing on the basis of ethnicity, religion or language (DeVotta 2004). Many Sinhala Buddhist patriotic organizations had their roots in the nineteenth century, but more still grew out of the radical grass-roots politics of the JVP in the 1970s and 80s. These groups were increasingly used by the state and political parties as a means of maintaining influence at the local level and, at times, for violently suppressing rival factions (*ibid*: 297).

²⁰ Some donors maintained a greater emphasis on human rights issues, which waxed and waned in relation to the political climate. There was a growing donor commitment to privileging human rights concerns, for example, in the peace process at the time of the Tokyo conference of 2003. Similarly, as the ceasefire agreement broke down after 2005, donors began to provide greater support to human rights activists. Groups campaigning on human rights issues during this period succeeded in giving humanitarian issues greater exposure internationally and were able to exert pressure on the government via advocacy at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, prompting the decision to strip the Sri Lankan government of its seat.

²¹ Interview with donor representative, Colombo 16th November 2006.

²² Interview with donor representative, December 2006.

²³ It should be noted that although these institutional transgressions were presented as illegitimate by nationalists, in fact the CSOs involved had been given prior approval by the state to conduct these activities.